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U.S. Experts Debate Variety of Approaches to Soviet Succession

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When Nikita Khrushchev met for the first time with John F. Kennedy in 1961 at the Vienna summit, the Soviet leader claimed that the Kremlin had cast the deciding ballot in Kennedy's slim electoral victory over Richard Nixon.

His reasoning was this: by delaying the release of U2 spy-plane pilot Francis Gary Powers until after the election, Khrushchev had denied Nixon a diplomatic victory and the opportunity to claim he knew how to deal with the Soviets. The ploy, Khrushchev told Kennedy, must have cost Nixon a half million votes—far more than the margin of victory.

U.S. leaders traditionally have held fewer illusions about the sway they hold over the selection of leaders inside the Kremlin. Nonetheless, as the struggle among Kremlin insiders to succeed the ailing 75-year-old Leonid Brezhnev begins, U.S. policy-makers and Kremlinologists are debating how to react to what many see as a rare chance to influence Soviet actions and ambitions.

In his arms control speech last week ago at Eureka College, President Reagan said, "We are approaching an extremely important phase in East-West relations as the current Soviet leadership is succeeded by a new generation." Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. in a recent speech called the succession a "historic opportunity" for the West to influence Soviet actions by making clear to the Kremlin's new men "the benefits of greater restraint."

Despite those assessments, analysts in and out of government say the Reagan administration, torn by deep internal disputes that are both ideological and personal, has only begun to take the first, tentative steps toward a coherent and consistent policy on Soviet succession.

Most Sovietologists believe that leadership changes in Moscow—as in Washington—are the result of internal politics generally not subject to influence by outside forces. Still, there have been historic moments when succession crises and foreign policy have touched. Some analysts believe the West squandered a golden opportunity when John Foster Dulles rejected Winston Churchill's advice to offer to the new Kremlin leadership a fresh relationship following Stalin's death in 1953.

One theme at a recent off-the-record dinner was not to trust anyone claiming to be able to predict who would win.

Others hold that the turning point in detente came in 1973, when Brezhnev and his advisers, during their visit to the United States came to realize that Watergate had fundamentally crippled Richard Nixon's presidency and his policies. The Soviet military buildup soon followed.

Once again, the administration and the small group of Kremlinologists whose analyses and debates have become a Washington cottage industry are attempting to draw a fix on the succession, its probable winners and losers and the policy issues that will play a role. Haig recently called together the country's most prominent Sovietologists for an off-the-record dinner at State. One of the themes that emerged, said one participant, was not to trust anyone who claimed to be able to predict who would win and where the winner would lead the Soviet Union. Even the CIA has urged caution.

In a recent 45-page, top-secret analysis presented to the president, intelligence sources were quoted as suggesting that Yuri Andropov, the Soviet Union's KGB chief, was Brezhnev's most likely successor. But the report quickly added that its estimate might well be wrong.

After months of debate and inaction, Haig's stated view that the succession offers a chance to reexamine in the broadest terms the relationship between Washington and Moscow appears to have won temporary ascendancy. The president's call for new arms limitation talks with Brezhnev or his successors suggests to many that the administration has decided to seize the initiative and treat the succession period as a time for friendly persuasion rather than the aggressive saber-rattling that critics say characterized earlier Reagan approaches to the Soviets.

But there are other competing schools of thought within the administration, and even the White House's most prominent hawks appear divided. Some hold that succession is an opportunity for the West to tighten the screws of foreign policy to intimidate and perhaps permanently cripple an implacable but weakened foe.

That particular line, identified publicly with hard-liners such as Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger and Richard Perle, assistant secretary of defense for international